Opinions of School Principals on the Impact of College Exams and Covid-19 Pandemic on Visual Arts Course

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this study is to determine the perspectives of school principals on the positive or negative effects of online applications and college exams in schools during the pandemic process. Within the framework of the study designed in the qualitative research model, the opinions of 21 school principals from 6 regions in Northern Cyprus were obtained through a semi-structured interview form. As a result of the research data analyzed by content analysis, it has been revealed that both the Covid-19 pandemic and the college exams have a negative effect on the visual arts course. In particular, the fact that the visual arts course is not within the scope of college exams is among the main reasons why it is considered trivial by teachers, students and parents alike.

KEYWORDS: Art education, school principals, college exams, Visual Arts Class, Covid-19

1. INTRODUCTION

Education, which plays an important role in the cultural transmission of societies, is the most critical indicator of a country's social, cultural and economic development. Individuals in the society continue their lives as members of various organizations such as schools, professional groups or associations. Each of the organizations with different characteristics also has specific goals; this is their most obvious similarity. In the realization of these goals of the organizations, administrators and leaders support the realization of the goals and offer their assistance and play an important role in this regard. Administration becomes mandatory when it comes to common goals (Sisk, 1977). Effective administrators, who are described as education and training leaders in schools, do the following: lead the education and training activities, provide constructive and objective evaluation and feedback to the teacher, research and supervise the teaching plans and strategies, as well as educational and teaching programs in order to increase the success of the students, observe how often they are used, follow and evaluate them, provide motivation, and try to solve the problems that may arise (Yörük and Akdağ, 2010). According to Castells (2001), art, which is one of the most effective ways of problem solving and empathy, is an important tool that contributes to the establishment of relations between different languages, religions, races, beliefs and cultures, and ensures living together by removing differences from being conflicts.

According to Fischer (1985), art, which has a structure that aims to inform the society, to be intertwined with people, and to add value and meaning to social events, has the following function: it guides people to know themselves, to compare themselves with other people, to empathize and to communicate well with their environment. Art is one of the most important elements of education programs that guide students to find new information based on existing information, enable them to express their own feelings and turn this process into visual forms. The integrity of education and art is the best indicator that there can be no content without form (Eiser, 2009). Also, painting, music, drama and similar arts, which help people to know themselves better, contribute to their perspectives on life and enrich their lives, as a tool that enables people to hold a mirror to themselves by revealing their experiences, enthusiasm and expectations represent a planned acculturation process in which the knowledge arising from the science of art and creative artistic activities coexist as aesthetic education carried out in schools. During art education, students go through emotional and intellectual creative processes, make designs, produce and try to reach the result they dream of. In this process, they interact with other individuals and communicate visually and verbally about art. This communication enriches the lives of students and contributes to their gaining aesthetic awareness.

Individuals acquire the aesthetic expression of the processes of perceiving events, thinking about them, raising awareness, interpreting, criticizing and reaching judgment by using the basic art education principles in the art education process. According to San (2004), the most suitable fields that contribute to the development of creativity among children starting from a young age are the fields of art such as painting, theater, music, dance, ceramics, and sculpture. In this respect, art education is a discipline that should be widely included in general education. Art teaches children that personal differences matter and that the solutions to questions do not have to be identical. In art, there is more than one interpretation of a musical note, more than one way of describing a painting or sculpture, and expression depending on the person or situation. Diversity and variability are centralized in art. Art is also an important course that education can learn from (Eiser, 2002; San, 2004).

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In this respect, the Ministry of National Education and Culture of Northern Cyprus (MEKB) aims to increase children's observation, interpretation and creativity capacities and to teach critical thinking in the visual arts course included in the curriculum of the basic education level (Basic Education Program, 2018). However, at the end of the compulsory primary school age, which is between the ages of 6 and 11, students who want to receive an English-based education must take the College Entrance Exam (KGS) conducted by the MEKB or the college entrance exams of private schools. In addition, after secondary school, they can either continue to vocational high schools without an exam, or they can enter Science High School, Anatolian High School or Fine Arts High School according to their wishes with the entrance exam organized by MEKB (TRNC National Education Law, 1986).

The school, which was opened as an English college in the British period in Northern Cyprus and named as Turkish Maarif College after 1963, was expanded in a similar fashion to the Anatolian High Schools in Turkey, and branches were opened in other districts after 1983 due to the intense interest in this school. As a result, college entrance exams have turned into exams attended by almost all students in that age group (Çağlar & Reis, 2007). The said exam curriculum includes the curriculum and books of "Turkish", "Mathematics", "Science and Technology", "Social Studies" and "English" courses approved by the Department of Education and published to be taught in the 5th grade of primary schools (KGS Guide Booklet, 2019). In 2020, 1979 senior school students entered the exam of the colleges where 620 students could enroll in total (Mebnet, 2019). Considering that the age group is around 3000, it is seen that two-thirds of primary school 5 students take this exam.

Like all other sectors in the world, the education sector has been greatly affected by the Covid-19 global pandemic, and education has begun to be continued online or offline at all levels from primary education to graduate level in the 2019-2020 Academic Year Spring Semester. In the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, as of March 10, 2020, face-to-face education has been suspended in schools in order to prevent the spread of the virus. The Ministry of National Education and Culture prepared distance education materials by managing the process in cooperation with Bayrak Radio and Television (BRT), and online education service was provided to students through television and media channels (Uysal and Karagöz, 2021). Within the scope of the study conducted by Sakarya (2021), the views of Çukurova University Interior Architecture Department students who received education during the pandemic period regarding distance education carried out specifically for the Technical Drawing course were examined. After taking the Technical Drawing course face-to-face in the fall semester of the same academic year, these students conducted the course online in the spring semester. The students tried to reveal the positive and negative aspects of the distance education system, which is mainly conducted online, by giving comparative feedback about the teaching methods. In this study, the students positively evaluated the distance education method followed in the Technical Drawing course and stated that it supports the learning activity, but they emphasized that they preferred the studio method, which they conducted face-to-face.

In another study, it was tried to determine the opinions of music teachers about the distance music education applications performed over the Education Information Network (EBA) during the Covid-19 pandemic (İnal, Sakarya, Zahal, 2021). This was qualitative research and the study group of the research consisted of 15 music teachers working in public schools affiliated to the Ministry of National Education (MEB) who offered online courses during the Covid-19 period. As a result of the research, it was found that most of the music teachers did not have experience in distance education and that they were in the process of adapting to this new situation, and that they thought that face-to-face education was a more suitable system for music education. They also believed that the participation of the students in the class was generally low, but the distance education application during the pandemic period was necessary. With the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, educational institutions, like all sectors, were affected and face-to-face education was suspended. All courses switched to distance education model through the EBA system of the Ministry of National Education and the distance education systems of higher education institutions. It has been seen in the research conducted by Kahraman (2020) that although there were no major problems in distance education in theoretical and computer-based courses at all levels, there have been various problems in the execution of Basic Design, Art and Design, Painting and Business courses and other laboratory, workshop and studio courses with the distance education model.

In this qualitative research, it was aimed to determine the opinions of the students whose face-to-face education opportunities were removed during the Covid-19 epidemic, about the compulsory distance education, and the opinions of 13 students, 10 boys and 3 girls, aged between 20 and 24 were consulted. In this qualitative research (Erzen, Ceylan, 2020), it was found that successful lecturers in distance education could make effective presentations, communicate quickly and create quality content, but the faculty members who are seen unsuccessful by the students are content to only share notes, share poor quality content, do not communicate, and give incomprehensible instructions in their homework assignments. In this study, it was also determined that although the students themselves did not experience any problems, some of their friends did not have access to a computer or internet, and they were worried about the insufficient speed of the devices they used to provide access. In the qualitative research conducted by Arık et al. (2021), it was aimed to determine the opinions of secondary school students about distance education applied during the Covid-19 pandemic process. For this purpose, 55 secondary school students attending classes in different cities of Turkey were included in the study and data were collected through the "semi-structured interview form" prepared by the researchers. The collected data were analyzed under five themes. As a result of the research, it was determined that the participants had positive views on the distance education process in terms of learning/teaching environment and discipline, time management and course duration, affective characteristics, flexibility and accessibility. On the contrary, it was found out that

participants had negative views in terms of student-teacher communication, inadequacies in learning/teaching, inadequacies in self-regulation/time, lack of feedback, technological problems and emotional inadequacies in the distance education process.

1.1 Objective of the Study

The main objective of the research is to determine the perspectives of school principals on whether online applications and college exams in schools have a positive or negative effect during the pandemic process. In order to achieve this general objective, answers to the following questions were sought:

1. How is student achievement measured in primary schools?
2. Do college exams have a positive or negative impact on art education courses?
3. Is there a negative perspective and prejudice in the society towards the visual arts course?
4. What are the positive or negative effects of online applications in schools on visual arts courses due to the Covid-19 pandemic? Please explain.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1 Research Model

This research was designed in the qualitative research model. Qualitative research is approaches that include data collection tools such as interview, observation and document analysis, and that events and perceptions take place in realistic environments on a scientific basis (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). The research was carried out in the scanning model as of the application of this method. The survey model, which aims to collect data to reveal certain characteristics of a group, describes the research subject as it is in its own terms (Büyüköztürk et al., 2016).

2.2. Population and Sample

The population of the research consists of 84 primary school principals working in primary schools in Northern Cyprus. The sample group consists of 21 school principals determined by purposeful snowball sampling, which is one of the non-random sampling methods. In the purposeful snowball sampling technique, individuals or situations that are a rich source of information regarding the acquisition of data are handled, and the population is reached by monitoring these individuals or critical situations (Creswell, 2013). The demographic characteristics of the school principals in the sample were named as K1, K2, …. K21. Of the 21 participants, 10 are male and 11 are female. In terms of education level, 11 people had undergraduate degrees, 8 people had master's degrees and 2 people had doctorate degrees. In terms of years of service, 9 people had experience between 11-20 years and 12 people had experience of 21 years and above. As the type of school they work, 20 people work in a public school and 1 person works in a private school.

2.3 Data Collection Tool and Data Collection

A semi-structured interview form developed by the researcher was used as a data collection tool in the study. In the semi-structured interview, the researcher can determine the questions in advance or, by sticking to the flow of the interview, can enable the person to clarify and elaborate the answers with different questions or sub-questions. In the developed interview form, in addition to the questions about the personal information of the school principals, there are a total of 4 open-ended questions about art education. While creating the form, the literature on the subject was examined and the form was given its final shape by consulting the opinions of 3 experts. While collecting the data, interview and observation forms were kept. Each interview was held in the principals' rooms in approximately 20 minutes.

2.4 Analysis of Data

Within the scope of this research, the content analysis method was used in the analysis of the data collected from the school principals through the interview form. "Content analysis is defined as reaching concepts and relationships that can explain the collected data. The main purpose here is to reach the concepts and relationships that can explain the collected data" (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2013: 227). In order to analyze the interviews with the school principals, the similarities and differences of the comments were coded and categorized. The resulting interrelated keywords were grouped into themes. In order for the readers to follow easily, the data obtained are explained and interpreted with tables.

3. FINDINGS and INTERPRETATION

3.1. How is student achievement measured in primary schools?

The themes and codes related to the answers given by the participants to the above question are presented in Table 1.

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Table 1: **Student achievement**

Theme	Sub-theme	Codes that emerged as a result of the interview	Participants
How is student achievement measured in primary schools?	• **Success is determined by college exams**	A holistic assessment method should be used.	K3, K6, K13, K19
		Opportunity for self-actualization should be given.	K1, K2, K7, K8
		A system should be adopted that will raise individuals who accept differences and have a developed aesthetic understanding.	K2, K7, K21
		A student-centered system based on interests and abilities should be created.	K5, K7, K9
		Examinations should be conducted without ignoring the needs of the society.	K4, K10
	• **There is no success evaluation unit**	Interests and abilities should be taken into account.	K15, K20
		The necessity of being evaluated with a portfolio by changing a single exam system	K12
	• **Success is determined by understanding the curriculum**	A pathway plan that aims to explore all academic fields and skills should be determined by the ministry	K11, K14, K17
		The requirement for full-time education and a simplified curriculum	K18

When the opinions of the school principals on the subject are examined in Table 1, regarding the theme of "Success is determined by college exams", majority (K1, K2, K7, K8) said "Opportunity should be given to self-realization" and "holistic evaluation method should be used" (K3, K6, K13, K19) codes. However, the code "Exams should be made without ignoring the needs of the society" regarding the theme in question was expressed by the least number of participants (K4, K10). Regarding the second theme, "There is no unit for evaluating success", it was revealed that 2 participants (K15, K20) emphasized that "Interests and abilities should be taken into account". In addition, only 1 participant (K12) stated that "It is necessary to be evaluated with a portfolio by changing a single exam system". Regarding the last theme, "Success is determined by comprehending the curriculum", the participants (K11, K14, K17) focused on the code "A road plan should be determined by the Ministry to explore all academic fields and skills". The code "Full-time education and a simplified curriculum requirement" was expressed by only 1 participant. When the sample opinions regarding the research question are examined, it can be seen that the following statements were recorded:

K4: It is measured according to the college exam. After a certain grade, the emphasis is on college. There should be a different system, the society should train students according to the branches they need, and guide them according to the interests and abilities of the person.

K9: According to the number of students admitted to the college, it is determined whether they are successful or not. So, how many of the children who come to me are suitable for college? How many people's performance is enough? My teacher is successful. If the child does not have a talent in this field, for example, can a fish climb a tree?

K13: It measures according to academic success. It looks at how many students are admitted to the college. There is no positive reflection, the student even becomes blunt. If I am successful in the courses, I am an ideal student; if he draws a beautiful picture, the child is not considered a successful student.

It is seen that most of the principals in the primary education institutions included in the research underline the thoughts that the school success is equated with the students who become successful in the college exams. Similarly, in Buyruk's (2014) study, it was found that the success of the school and the teacher was measured by the number of students who were successful in

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the college exam. In the report of the State Planning Organization (2005), it was emphasized that the education system implemented in primary schools was indexed to colleges, and the success of the student was measured by teaching only for exams.

3.2. Do college exams have a positive or negative effect on art education classes? Why?
The themes and codes related to the answers given by the principals to the above question and the respective reasons are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: **The impact of college exams**

Theme	Sub-theme	Codes that emerged as a result of the interview	Participants
Do college exams have a positive or negative effect on art education classes? Why?	**POSITIVE**	Meeting emotional need through success	K14, K10
	NEGATIVE	Using art classes for make-up courses for the exam	K1, K2, K4, K11, K12, K15
		Assuming that the criterion of success consists of the college exam	K13, K16, K20, K21
		Education system that is not suitable for the development period	K9, K5, K6
		Due to the lack of branch teachers in art classes	K7, K17, K19
		Negative attitudes of families towards art classes	K3, K8
		Lack of an arts education strategy by the ministry of education	K18

According to Table 2, when the opinions of the participants are examined according to the effect of the college exams on the visual arts course, 2 participants (K10, K14) expressed a positive opinion, while the other 19 participants said that they had a negative effect. 2 participants (K2, K14) responded positively to the code "Meeting emotional needs with success". When the opinions of the participants who gave negative opinions are examined, it is seen that the answers given are in 6 codes. While most of the participants (K1, K2, K4, K11, K12, K15) emphasized the code "Using art courses for make-up courses for the exam", only 1 participant (K18) explained the code "The Ministry of Education does not have an art education strategy". Some of the answers of 21 participants to the above question on whether the college exams have a positive or negative effect on art education courses and the reasons for this are given below:

K1: So it is something like this, that is, it is not even considered as a course, it is even preferred by some educators so that college work can be done. In other words, I think that as long as this college phenomenon remains, unfortunately, art education cannot be mentioned. College exam has a negative effect on art education.

K7. Neutral. Now let me tell you, it is not about having an issue such as the KGS exam or not. Why, because you know that every teacher has to do it according to the time that the Ministry of Education has planned. If every teacher carries out his curriculum correctly in his scheduled time, he will already complete and finish his schedule. As a matter of fact, if the visual arts teacher, music teacher or physical education teacher who attends the class spends the 2 hours reserved for them in line with the targeted behavioral gains for their children, there will be no problem.

It is seen that the majority of the school principals included in the research underline the negative effect of the "college" factor on the visual arts course. The Cyprus Turkish Teachers' Union (1999) expressed the finding that art courses were ignored due to the examination-centered education system as follows: "In order to be able to enter these schools based on the competitive mentality, large numbers of private courses and private teaching institutions have been witnessed in the country due to the college entrance exams (KTÖS, 1999: 126)". This statement supports the above findings. This situation has led education and training to be directed towards exam-oriented work. However, regarding the education system that is not suitable for the developmental period, it has been stated in the studies that children cannot develop properly in accordance with their developmental age due to the fact that they have to study too much and solve tests due to the exam, and they cannot perform many social activities required by their age because they cannot find time (Karadeniz & Tangülü, 2014).

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3.3. Do you think there is a negative point of view and prejudice in the society towards the visual arts course?

For the answers given by the participants to the above question, 3 themes and 6 codes were reached. These are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Society's perspective

Theme	Sub-theme	Codes that emerged as a result of the interview	Participants
Do you think there is a negative point of view and prejudice in the society towards the visual arts course?	**THERE IS**	Because of the view of the school and the teacher of the course	K2, K6, K7, K11, K15, K16
		Due to the negative impact of the college exam	K5, K12, K19
	THERE IS NOT	College exam should be abolished	K1, K3, K9, K10
		The mentality problem caused by the current system	K4, K20, K21
		Due to the fact that the education system does not have any expectations from the course	K13, K14, K17
		Economic reasons	K8, K18

When the opinions of the school principals regarding the above question are examined in Table 3, nine participants claimed that there was a negative perspective in the society towards the visual arts course, while the other 12 participants stated that there was no negative prejudice. Considering the opinions of the participants who stated that the society has a negative viewpoint towards the course in question, it is seen that the answers are composed of 2 codes. In particular, the majority of the participants (K2, K6, K7, K11, K15, K16) argued that there was a negative judgment "because of the school and teacher's view of the course". The participants (K1, K3, K9, K10) who think that the society does not have a negative point of view expressed their opinions mostly with the code "College exam should be abolished".

The opinions of the primary school principals included in the research that there is no 'social prejudice or negative point of view' towards the visual arts course, that the course is not within the scope of college exams, and that the current system has no expectations from the course have emerged, or that some principals did not express them clearly. Examples of comments on the above question are as follows:

K1: There is no prejudice socially, but this is because of the existing college system. You're going to abolish the college, that's the only solution. Instead of a competitive mindset, creative activities will be possible with a managerial mindset. People should be in such a way that they can understand and discover their own skills. And of course, besides art education, our National Education law already includes directing children to vocational education, but there is no direction here.

K2: The society does not care about courses such as painting, music and drama as much as courses such as mathematics, Turkish and English... Schools and teachers have a considerable role in the formation of this point of view in society. Schools and teachers need to do their part in transforming this. Like painting, they can change the contribution of art classes to people by creating awareness.

K8: Regarding art, it is taken into account whether it is an income generating activity in small societies. When they tell the child to be an artist, the parents feel guilty at the end of the day.

As a result of the mentality problem stemming from the current system, college entrance exams have turned into exams attended by almost all students in this age group. The indexing of education in primary schools to college entrance exams has also led to social, educational, psychological and sociological problems in the country (Çağlar and Reis, 2007). In addition, it is seen in the research conducted by Kahveci (2009) that the competitive mentality created by the central examination systems creates a great burden on the family economy by directing families to private courses and private teaching institutions.

3.4. What were the positive or negative effects of online applications in schools for the Visual Arts course due to the Covid-19 pandemic? Please explain.

The themes and codes related to the answers given by the participants to the above question are given in Table 4 below:

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Table 4: Online applications implemented in schools

Theme	Sub-theme	Codes that emerged as a result of the interview	Participants
What were the positive or negative effects of the online applications applied in schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic on the Visual arts course? Please explain	**POSITIVE**	Providing technology adaptation	K8,
		Providing education independent from time and space	K1, K17
		Making it easier to access different resources at the same time	K2
	NEGATIVE	Course teachers do not have enough online resources and equipment	K3, K15
		Decreased course time and failure to evaluate the applications effectively	K9, K14,
		Difficulty in transferring applied courses online	K7, K10, K11, K12, K16
		Course teachers are not prepared to conduct applied courses online (unprepared transition to online education)	K5, K18
		Problems related to the size of the videos prepared, internet access and speed problems (Technological infrastructure problems)	K4, K6, K19, K20
		Difficulty of education suitable for individual differences	K21, K13

When the opinions of the school principals regarding the above question are examined in Table 4, it can be seen that four participants claimed that it contributed positively to the visual arts course, while the other 17 participants stated that it had a negative effect. When we look at the opinions of the participants who stated that it had a negative impact on the course in question, it was seen that especially the majority of the participants (K7, K10, K11, K12, K16) advocated a negative judgment indicated by the code "It is difficult to transfer applied courses online". In addition, it was seen that the participants who expressed the most frequently seen opinions among the positive sub-themes (K1, K17) expressed their opinions with the code of "enabling education independent from time and space".

It is seen that the primary school principals included in the research clearly stated that online applications for the visual arts course negatively affect the visual arts course. Some of the principals' views on the above question are as follows:

K2: Our teachers shot videos at home in explaining some of the subjects and they made all students watch these videos. Thus, they gained time by not telling the same thing to different groups again.

K7: The approach in the face-to-face course and the online process is quite far from each other. Your communication with children takes place only through cameras. This situation reduces the interaction momentarily and the teacher cannot give examples on the applications as he wishes.

K9: It is very difficult to keep the students in front of the screen, they are interested in a certain period of time, so the class times are shorter in front of the screen.

K21: Actually, the pandemic has had its advantages, but it has more disadvantages. Because it became difficult to intervene directly with the student on a timely basis.

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the visual arts course were examined in terms of school principals. As a result of the interviews with the school principals, it is seen that they stated that the course was negatively affected in terms of online applications in schools. As a result of the research, it was concluded that it is difficult to transfer and evaluate applied courses online, individual differences are ignored, and the readiness processes of teachers in terms of technical equipment and infrastructure are not sufficient. As a result of the research conducted by Türküresin (2020), it was stated that there are problems in the measurement and evaluation part of online education. Erdoğan and Ayanoğlu (2021) also emphasized that teachers are not prepared for distance education. Sen and Kızılcalıoğlu (2020) stated that online education negatively affected learning.

4. CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS

Guiding students in line with their interests and abilities in education is the basis for their happiness and success. As a matter of fact, many schools have a system attuned to exams instead of visual arts courses that will improve creativity, imagination and questioning skills. Therefore, other courses that are considered more important are added to the curriculum, ignoring the main purpose and necessity of art courses. Eiser (2002) also considers courses such as science and mathematics in schools as the primary resource because of the effects of traditional views on the goals and content of education. It is believed that the processes of reading, writing and calculating are the best ways to develop the mind. Parallel to this idea, it is requested that the curricula be arranged in the same way to obtain higher test scores. According to this view, it is stated that art is accepted as a small part of this project at best. Over the years, the value given to visual arts education courses in Northern Cyprus has gradually decreased in duration (Karagöz, 2020). In the report of the Northern Cyprus Vision 2030 Education Strategic Plan Workshop, teacher training for the transformation that needs to be realized in our country's education system and for a more qualified education, establishment of a more qualified control mechanism in education, reducing the course load on the students and art education were emphasized. In the same report, it was stated that besides art education, it was aimed to increase the weight of sports courses in the curriculum (KKTCMEB, 2019). Art fosters the ability to think powerfully. The importance of visual arts course in general education and training programs, which has several purposes such as aesthetic thinking, productivity and producing creative ideas in art education, and finding solutions to problems by developing different perspectives, cannot be denied. In line with the opinions of school principals in Northern Cyprus, it has been determined that the effects of college exams on visual arts classes in primary schools are generally negative. As a result of the data obtained, although it was emphasized by the school stakeholders that the visual arts course, which is not included in the college exams, is important, it affects this course negatively as a result. To gain the acquisitions aimed by art classes, they must be applied properly. For students, teachers and families to attach importance to visual arts classes, including questions on arts topics in the college entrance exams, as well as considering student achievements in the fields of art and some of the certificates they have received, will increase the importance and application of these courses. In addition, since it has been determined that teachers, students and administrators have deficiencies in using information technologies in the process experienced during the Covid-19 period, it becomes important to strengthen the technological infrastructures in schools and homes and to provide technical support trainings on online education to all stakeholders.

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